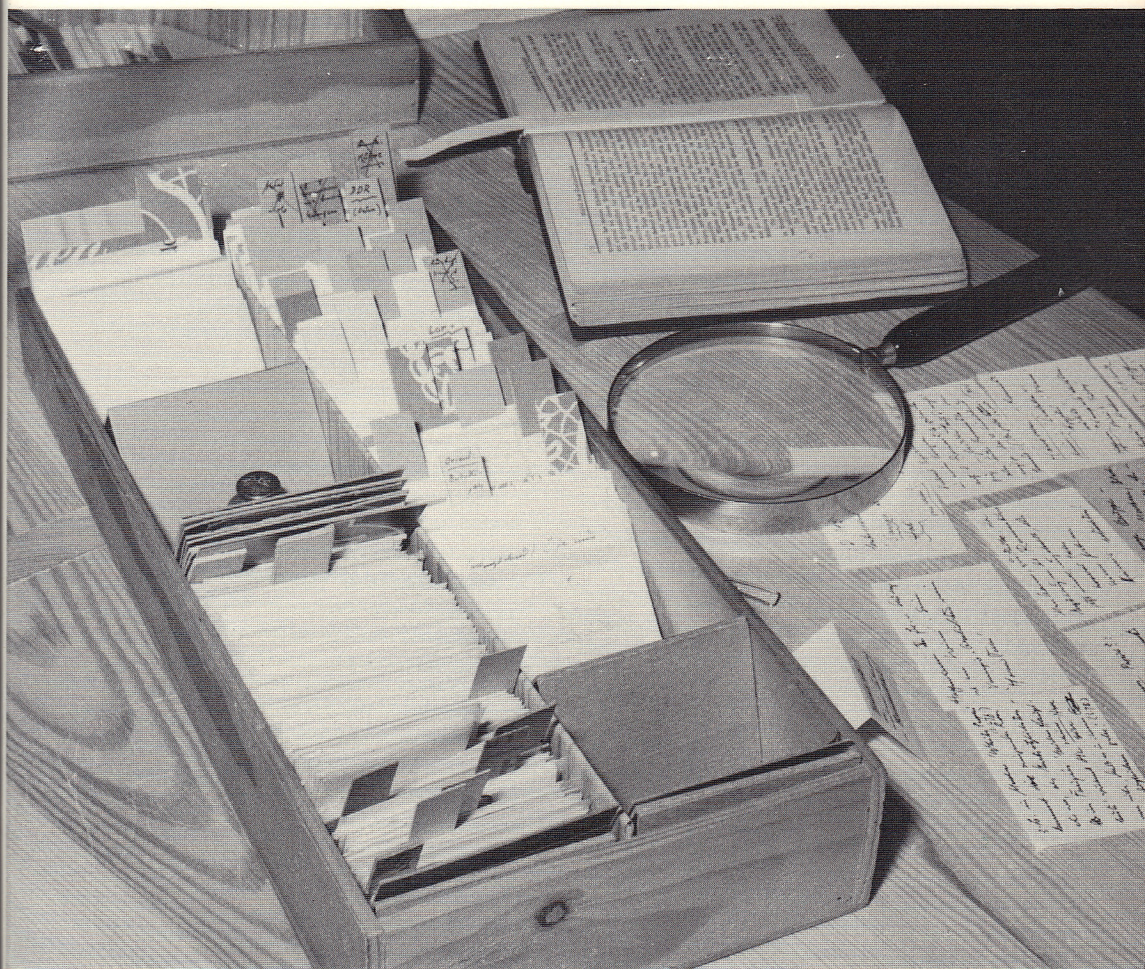


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Schmidt / Joyce: Anatomy of a Misunderstanding

Stefan Gradmann

ARNO SCHMIDT HAS BEEN called a "German Joyce" more than once. The following points are mainly directed against this hasty identification and try to provide a conceptual frame for the understanding of the fundamental difference between the two writers. If this notion of a difference between Schmidt and Joyce is in my eyes necessary for an understanding of Schmidt's writing, I nevertheless do not wish to expose a merely statical opposition: this opposition has its place only in a dialectical reflection separating Schmidt and Joyce on one level—as it will be done here—in order to reapproach them on a higher level of synthesis. I have also tried to provide some bibliographical references, which might be helpful without being exhaustive.

1. In his period of intense preoccupation with Joyce (i.e., from 1957 to 1970)¹ Schmidt was constantly trying to interpret Joyce's work to his own ends rather than allowing himself to be shaped by his Irish precursor. In thus forcibly trying to adapt Joyce to his own needs, Schmidt often deformed or misinterpreted Joycean intentions and patterns of writing. These deformations were not always recognizable, due to the fact that they were presented mainly in radio dialogues, a medium which placed them on a level somewhere between exact philology and literary criticism. Besides, *Finnegans Wake* at least was far from being widely read; Schmidt's assertions therefore were not controlled by a competent public.

2. Schmidt's attempt to mold Joyce to his own uses should not be allowed to obscure the fundamental incompatibilities existing between them. These inconsistencies carry far more weight than certain affinities, which have already been pointed out.² Schmidt seems to have become conscious of this fact during the sixties; the consequences he drew from this recognition can be observed especially in his critical statements on *Finnegans Wake* and in his partisanship for Stanislaus Joyce.³

3. The radical conceptional differences between the respective positions of Schmidt and Joyce may be sketched in the following, necessarily simplified contrast. The discrepancies are mainly situated in terms of the relation

between the literary sign and the perceivable physical or mental reality, that is to say, on the level of "reference."

3.1. Schmidt, as a "realist," was closely attached to a relatively limited conception of "mimesis." His literary techniques are generally characterized in terms of "depiction," "report" or "description,"⁴ although a certain development towards a differentiation among these techniques cannot be denied. In any case, the text is constituted on the basis of direct reference to extralinguistical "reality"; this observation applies to Schmidt's description of external "reality" as perceived by the individual ("Raster"/"Photos") as well as to what Schmidt himself calls "conformal representation of cerebrations" ("Längeres Gedankenspiel"—"Extended Mind Game"/"Etym").

In contrast, though Joyce as well was partially attached to a "realistic" concept of writing in his first books, this "realism" in his work is gradually supplanted by a tendency to what I propose to call an autoconstitution of word systems. Already in *Ulysses* the making of the text cannot be seen as depending entirely on direct reference to the world of experience; in *Finnegans Wake* the persisting fragments of "reality" no longer have a primary impact in an almost closed system of words and allusions, in which "reference" is constantly absent and even denotative signification, if present, hard to identify: *Finnegans Wake* comes very close to a "jeu libre de signifiants"—if such a thing exists.

3.2. In order to distinguish clearly the literary techniques of Schmidt and Joyce, I suggest respectively the terms of "conglomeration" and "synthesis." This distinction may be illustrated in a typological comparison of *Zettels Traum* and *Finnegans Wake*:

a) In *Zettels Traum* the linguistic units (hardly to be called words) are combined mainly additively or at the most by conglomeration. Even if this technique of conglomeration may modify the form of the linguistic sign in some cases, the sign itself or at least its components remain identifiable in their conventional form—including their well-defined reference to extralinguistical "reality" and their denotative qualities; even if denotations may be multiplied, the semantic polyvalence of some units in *Zettels Traum* still remains decodable and may be reduced to a limited set of denotations.

b) In *Finnegans Wake* a real binding of linguistic signs is often to be found, which might well be illustrated by the image of chemical reaction. In such a reaction a matter is composed from separate substances; the properties of the composed matter cannot be simply described as the sum of the reacting elements' properties. Moreover, a chemical reaction is not simply reversible. With this image in mind the constitution of the text in *Finnegans Wake* can be described as a synthetical process operative on all levels of complexity of the literary sign. In a text structured this way the significate of the synthetically produced unit (as signifiant) is no more

the sum of the combined significates, its connotative semantic aspect cannot be reduced to a limited plurality of denotative "meanings," and the synthetical unit contains an additional linguistic reality which may not be analytically reduced to perhaps identifiable "realistic" reference without losing some of its characteristic substance.⁵

3.3. In Joyce's work "mythos" may be seen as one of the structures which essentially organize the combination of linguistic signs on different levels of complexity: from the "word" to the book as a whole. "Mythos" thus operates in the context of textual synthesis very much like a catalyst in a chemical reaction. The term used by Schmidt to indicate the place of myth in *Finnegans Wake* ("mystisches Lesemodell"/"mystical pattern of reading") therefore is not appropriate for pointing out the characteristics of Joyce's use of myth; more than a mythical pattern of reading, it is a mythical paradigm operative on many levels of the work.

The mythical elements in Schmidt's work do not perform a similar function. Even his probably most successful attempt to integrate mythical elements in one of his texts ("Caliban über Setebos")⁶ is not closely attached to a mythical paradigm, as is often the case in Joyce's work; even if the presence of dispersed fragments of orphic mythological tradition in "Caliban über Setebos" is undeniable, the text cannot be seen as essentially structured by these rather incoherent elements.

4. Schmidt was more or less conscious of these discrepancies, but he never came to analyze them clearly.

4.1. Instead of this he tried to provide a coherent analysis of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* in terms of his "realistic" conception of the relation between linguistic structure and perceivable "reality." In this attempt he was more successful in the case of *Ulysses* than in that of *Finnegans Wake*. He therefore preferred the former and declared that *Finnegans Wake* was "too deeply encoded."

4.2. In thus accusing *Finnegans Wake* of being too contrived, Schmidt wrongly presumed that Joyce's concept of writing was the same as his own (i.e., a technique of encoding using more or less complex "conglomerates").

4.3. Schmidt did become aware of the fact that Joyce's strategies of writing and his own were less compatible than he had thought in the beginning (the point where his admiration turned to more and more harsh reactions against Joyce must be situated around 1960, when his series of articles devoted to a "decoding" of *Finnegans Wake* appeared in *Die Zeit*); he then tried to free himself from the overwhelming influence of Joyce during the sixties. In this attempt at emancipation he made excessive use of Stanislaus Joyce in exhuming the struggle of the two brothers and partially taking the side of Stanislaus. Schmidt's attempt to reduce *Finnegans Wake* to the biographical model of a polemic pamphlet against Stanislaus has to be seen in the same perspective. Schmidt seems to have succeeded in this

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process of emancipation, his last word on the topic being in some respect the writing of *Zettels Traum* as a monstrous anti-Finnegan.⁷ After *Zettels Traum*, allusions to Joyce and his work, which could be found before in large number, almost completely vanished from Schmidt's literary work, and his analysis of *Finnegans Wake* was not, as the end of the essay "Kalleidoskopische Kollidiereskaden" ("may be continued") seemed to promise, taken up again.

NOTES

- 1 Joyce is first mentioned in *Die Gelehrtenrepublik* (1957); after the publication of *Zettels Traum* in 1970 the allusions to Joyce have disappeared in Schmidt's work.
- 2 See Jörg Drews, "Work after the 'Wake': A First Look at the Influence of James Joyce on Arno Schmidt," *Bargfelder Bote* 19 (February 1977): 3-14. Also: Robert Wohlleben, "Götter und Helden in Niedersachsen: Über das mythologische Substrat in 'Caliban über Setebos,'" *Bargfelder Bote* 3 (June 1973); without pagination. A valuable source of information is Robert Weninger, *Arno Schmidt's Joyce-Rezeption 1957-70: Ein Beitrag zur Poetik Arno Schmidts* (Frankfurt/Bern, 1982).
- 3 See Schmidt's essays "Kaleidoskopische Kollidiereskaden" and "Der Triton mit dem Sonnenschirm," also his *Vorläufiges zu "Zettels Traum"* and "Das Buch Jedermann."
- 4 The poetological terms are taken from Schmidt's "Berechnungen" 1 and 2.
- 5 Schmidt involuntarily proved this in his attempts to translate parts from the *Wake*: the translation, being based on Schmidt's inadequate assumptions, lacks essential qualities of *Finnegans Wake*. The translations are to be found in *Der Triton mit dem Sonnenschirm*; a very useful critical analysis of these translations has been given by Fritz Senn, "'Entzifferungen & Proben': 'Finnegans Wake' in der Brechung von Arno Schmidt," *Bargfelder Bote* 27 (February 1978): 3-14.
- 6 The role of mythical elements in this text has been the subject of an extremely controversial discussion among Schmidt scholars. The main positions are: Robert Wohlleben, op. cit.; Joachim Kaiser, "Des Sengers Phall," *Bargfelder Bote* 5-6, (November 1973), unpaginated; and Jörg Drews, "Caliban casts out Ariel," *Gebirgslandschaft mit Arno Schmidt* (München, 1982), 46-65.
- 7 The reading of *Zettels Traum* as anti-Wake is to some extent suggested by Schmidt himself in his exegetical comment on his own work, *Vorläufiges zu "Zettels Traum."*